

The House Beautiful of Japan

THE HOUSE BEAUTIFUL OF JAPAN

THERE are certain ideals in Japanese art which are no less apparent in Japanese architecture and gardening, yet the art of Japan only as embodied in prints, paintings, porcelain, cloisonné and ivory has found a wide popular acceptance in this country. Why this should be so is very difficult to imagine, and can only be ascribed to the fact that, in the west, the houses and gardens of Japan are virtually unknown.

We turned with relief from over-decorated interiors to the simplicity of the "Mission" scheme of decoration, yet, oddly enough, overlooked a type more esthetically satisfying, and more intrinsically interesting.

Perhaps there has been a too general indulgence in the idea that Oriental art is "complex"—that a Japanese interior is too exotic, too alien for successful adaptation in this country. As a popular idea this is no more founded on fact than

most popular ideas, nor is it less erroneous. The complexity of oriental art is that baffling quality which results from carefully studied simplicity. The interior decoration of a Japanese house is the result of an elimination of the useless—an elimination lasting over many centuries. There is nothing experimental about it. Upon first seeing a marvellously executed Japanese interior, rich in dull gold and oiled teak-wood, yet wonderfully subdued, an appreciative lady was heard to remark: "The Japanese are so clever to do such a beautifully *novel* hall-way!" to which the quiet Japanese host replied that he regretted its lack of any strictly up-to-date qualities, in that the houses of Japan were decorated in no wise differently four thousand years ago!

In the western life of varied and wearying activities the restfulness of the Japanese idea of an interior should come as a balm to over-wrought nerves and tired eyes. There are broad, cool spaces, dull and subdued, yet interesting colors. Little furniture is wanted, and ornaments are few but carefully selected. One rare porcelain or



Courtesy of Yamanaka & Company

A JAPANESE GARDEN WITH TEA-HOUSE AT TUXEDO PARK, N. Y.

DESIGNED BY S. MORI

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a bit of cloisonné may grace a simple teak-wood stand. The windows are treated with semi-opaque paper and light teak lattice, obscuring any jarring note from outside. On a wall of soft gray or dull gold, delicately decorated with graceful flowers or charming landscape, what need of picture? On a wall not treated thus, let there be one beautiful print, or a rare kakemono. If there is a large collection of porcelains, ivories or bronzes, the Japanese does not tire himself and his friends of them by keeping the entire collection constantly in view. All but one or two are put away behind invisible sliding doors in the wall, or in the many compartments of a closed cabinet and taken out only for those who may appreciate.

The interior illustrated, one of many in a house at Tuxedo Park recently decorated by a Japanese firm, well known for its taste, the simplicity and adequacy of the treatment is worthy of serious study. The wood-work, simple and free of meaningless mouldings, is of natural mahogany. The

walls are of a curious neutral tint, somewhere in a chromatic value between gray and tan, while the panels of the ceiling are again in a neutral between green and tan, painted with dull brown patterns. The walls are delicately decorated, and the doors do not disturb the quiet harmony of the room, being treated in a manner similar to the walls, and in the same colorings.

Such interiors make the instant impression that is felt at the sight of any work of art. Here is the tangible evidence of the hand of a master-decorator—and who in the history of the civilized world have proved them-

selves in any measure equal to the Japanese in this art?

Everything the Japanese touches he beautifies—in no case has his handiwork been superficial, vulgar or stupid—and in these three detrimental particulars many other schools have been conspicuous. And that all things Japanese have this quality of refined and delicate beauty is traceable not to any studied effort on the part of



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the Japanese, but to the fact that he comes of a race of artists, whose ideals for thousands of years back have been ideals of beauty. Physically he lives in a beautiful country, a country abounding in picturesque in its conformation, its flora, its costumes and its customs. Art in all things is so inseparably a part of the people that neither can be understood without the other.

Having, with a superficiality which brevity may pardon, pointed out certain salient characteristics of the Japanese idea of interior decoration, we find that the principles of simplicity in the interior are reversed in the garden, and that if any principle is followed, it is complexity. More accurately stated, the Japanese idea of a garden, as opposed to that of most of the great Italian and English garden builders, is that the garden should be a place of pleasant surprises. It must not be laid out by diagram, with obvious "axes" and "centres," with formal planting and the like. The Japanese garden abounds in quaint turnings and unexpected little bridges over pools of aquatic plants. Here and there are stone lanterns, miniature rock-gardens and rivulets.

A Japanese writer, who is by way of being an authority on the matter, says: "In the western garden one walks, for that seems to be the primary purpose of its construction; but the Japanese garden is planned to be looked at, and as a consequence, the Japanese house, even upon the tiniest plot of ground, has a garden. Attached to the dwellings in the crowded cities, such as Tokio or Osaka, you may even see gardens six feet by three; and even in such a bit of a garden will be a mountain covered with woods, a lake with an island and a tiny bridge, a waterfall, and perhaps an arbor and artistic lanterns. In the construction of such gardens the dwellers in the crowded cities seek to satisfy their longing for nature by looking at a landscape which appeals to them. They consider it as one considers a miniature by Isabey, and are wonderfully proud of it."

And here, as in most things Japanese, is an admirable piece of general philosophy of life, illustrating not only a theory of laying out gardens, but of deriving a maximum of pleasure from a minimum source.

C. M. P.